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Research Panel: Assigned Leaders in Unionized Environments - Strategies for Change in Academic Libraries

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ASSIGNED LEADERS IN UNIONIZED ENVIRONMENTS: STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

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INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

- Cumulative effects of decades of declining public-sector financial support, although there are recent signs of recovery
- Funding constraints having a major impact on many academic institutions, even as libraries have faced accelerating changes in technology, unsustainable models of scholarly communication, and heightened competition
- Explored if and how unionization has helped or hindered library administrators as they tried to transform libraries
- Gaps in the literature about changes occurring in unionized libraries and in leaders' abilities to transform organizations
- Purpose of study was to provide insights about changes occurring in unionized libraries since the economic recession of 2008/2009; and to explore if and how assigned leaders have tried to ensure that strategic changes still occur

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- **Institutional and Library Context**
 - To identify changes occurring in unionized academic libraries as a result of continuing funding constraints
 - To identify perceptions that university administrators have about the changes, and effects of unionization on assigned leaders' attempts to handle the constraints
- **Union Context**
 - To identify the benefits and constraints that administrators encounter as a result of working within unionized contexts during economic downturns
- **Leadership Context**
 - To identify assigned leaders' strategies for handling changes in financially stressed, unionized environments

METHODOLOGY

- Mixed-method case studies of four large, public-sector academic libraries with the same Carnegie institutional-research classification rank and similar economic indicators
- Online survey conducted to determine libraries' unionization status and other characteristics.
- Cases selected through criteria sampling. Eight libraries in subject population, but only four agreed to participate
- Data also gathered through qualitative interviews with 21 administrators (provosts, vice provosts, library directors, etc.), 4 focus-group interviews with unionized librarians and staff
- Content analysis of collective bargaining documents

KEY FINDINGS: CHANGES OCCURRING

- Chronic fiscal stress, pessimistic budget outlook in terms of new institutional investments
- Loss of acquisitions buying power and librarian/staff positions
- Broad adjustments being made in organizational structures, functions, and individual positions
- Minimal focus on external fundraising or entrepreneurship at these particular libraries – other studies bear this out broadly
- No significant changes perceived in libraries' performance levels (but this was not based on actual data)
- No significant changes perceived in interactions between library administrators and unionized librarians/staff members
- Experiencing the threat or actuality of organizational decline

Causes of Public-Sector Decline

	Internal	External
Political	Political vulnerability	Problem depletion
Economic/Technical	Organizational atrophy	Environmental entropy

FINDINGS:

OTHER ADMINISTRATORS' VIEWS

- Aware of staffing and budgeting challenges, but none seemed optimistic regarding increases to libraries' allocations
- Aware of heavier workload on remaining employees, challenges in keeping morale/commitment levels high
- Agreed that libraries' performance levels remained high (but this was not based on actual data)
- Perceptions about unions bringing both negative and positive effects, causing HR issues
- Less managerial flexibility, more bureaucracy
- "Communities of interest" caused structural challenges
- Negative effects amplified in times of economic crisis
- Shared governance both improved and damaged

KEY FINDINGS: UNION BENEFITS/CONSTRAINTS

- Agreements negotiated, administered by others outside the library, with little ability of library to influence process
- Administrative decision-making about budgets perceived to be mostly intact
- Delays in planning/implementation of changes in the libraries
- Less flexibility in regard to HR issues, more overall bureaucracy
- Did not think fiscal adversity would damage relationships with unionized personnel or affect libraries' performance levels
- Unions not contesting technological changes overall
- Extensive use of shared, participatory leadership approaches
- Organizational values shifted toward more internal focus, stability, and control, than toward adaptability and flexibility

KEY FINDINGS: CHANGE STRATEGIES USED

- Strategic visioning/planning used extensively; some leaders adjusted both due to economic troubles
- Communication and transparency emphasized heavily
- Innovative thinking and resourcefulness seen as key to thriving in lean times – restructuring, redesigning work, and implementing new services
- Leaders used shared, participatory, and team leadership approaches at each site to different degrees
- Institutional accountability/assessment weakly presented at two sites, a bit stronger at other two sites
- Protecting existing positions was a high-priority at all sites

FINDINGS: OTHER GENERAL THEMES

- Content of collective bargaining agreements did not seem to match shared governance levels, assertion of management rights
- Organizational cultures, relationships, and identities were affected
- Argument made that unionized environments needed even more effective managerial leadership functions than non-unionized
- Assigned leaders were emergent leaders in most situations, and used strategies corresponding to established leadership models
- Strong focus on people and personal values at two sites; stronger stewardship and strategic thinking at other two sites
- Attributes of honesty, fairness, courage, and credibility named by unionized employees as crucial for good leadership

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

- Seemingly inconsistent responses? Explanations proposed:
 - Unionization as controversial, sensitive topic
 - Perceived levels of control and instrumentality
 - Unionized environments as inherited legacies
 - Lack of research on unionization in libraries
- Need for comparative, longitudinal, and single-case studies
- Need to study leadership attributes and strategies
- Need to study effectiveness of leadership strategies
- More study on intersection of leadership, unionization, and economic stress
- Better education of academic library leaders

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY (CONTINUED)

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- Organizational cultures, identities, values, and effectiveness
- External fundraising and entrepreneurship
- Politically intelligent leadership, application of model
- Administrative strength, accountability, & evaluation/assessment
- Union-management cooperation – follow best practices
- Pay attention to organizational dysfunction and employee morale
- Resiliency in leadership, application of Resonant Leadership model
- More research needed using theories/models in literatures of organizational sciences, management, and public administration

IMPLICATIONS: CHANGE STRATEGIES NEEDED

- Counter decline, if any
 - Emphasize resiliency and adaptive changes
 - Strengthen the library's expertise and assessment efforts
 - Diversify the library's programs, but make sure to integrate new work into the library's mission to avoid role confusion
 - Educate users and mobilize them through strategic marketing
 - Could try to cut visible and widespread services to demonstrate user dependence (but this one is risky)
 - Consciously make decisions to "resist" or "smooth" the decline

QUESTIONS? THANK YOU!



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